

From Text to Context: Hermeneutics of Sacred Texts and Gendered Public Sphere in Islam

Saiqa Jabeen Shouket

MPhil Scholar, Department of Islamic and Religious Studies,
Hazara University-Mansehra, KP, Pakistan.

Muhammad Shakeel Ahmad

Assistant Professor, Centre for Policy Studies, COMSATS
University-Islamabad, Pakistan/ Post-Doctoral Fellow, School
of Politics and International Relations, The University of
Nottingham United Kingdom (UK).
Email: shakeelahmad.awan@gmail.com

Abstract

The Quran is a primary sacred text for all Muslims which provides a basic idea of Islamic legislation and women role in politics. There are numerous verses in the Quran that teaches the followers to understand and support the participation of women in politics in a given context. Hermeneutics of Quran and the gendered public sphere have complex and critical relationships with each other. The sacred religious text of the Quran is interpreted in multiple perspectives depending on socio-cultural and historical context. Society largely reconcile its intellectual tone through interpretation of text and knowledge production. The paper is an attempt to elaborate on the hermeneutics of the Quran in the context of women's politics. There is a contradictory hermeneutical debate on Quranic text on the issue of women existing in the political sphere. Interpretation is a continuous process and deeply embedded in socio-cultural dynamics. Based on a principles of hermeneutics, Quran is considered to be for all times and ages. As per the rhetoric of the 21st century, the contemporary hermeneutics of the Quran provides equal human space to all genders.

Key Words:

Quran, Gender, Public
Sphere, Hermeneutics,
Politics

Introduction

Hermeneutics is a complex phenomenon in studying religious text due to its scientific orientation. In contemporary societies, the study of hermeneutics is important due to its complexities. The idea of hermeneutics is based on Kants' philosophy of idealism. Etymologically the word hermeneutics is connected with Greek root word, '*hermeneuin*' which means 'interpretation'. The term was first used by Plato in his famous work, 'Politics.' Hermeneutics in Islamic studies is a problematic issue. In modern Muslim societies, the hermeneutical method has been utilized by Amina Wadud, Hasan Hanafi, Fazalur-Rehman, Nasir Hamid Abu Zaid, JavedAhmd Ghamdi, etc. Some Scholar considered hermeneutics as an awkward term (Zarkasy, 2004). Some believe that interpretation never stops, so hermeneutics is a better way to interpret the text in a contemporary context. The prominent Islamic scholars like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan abd Muhammad Abduh had a major concern over interpretation. The Islamic Scholar Fazulur Rehman, in his book 'Islam and Modernity, shows concern over not using the hermeneutics methodology by the religious scholars in Islam. Modern Scholars are now considering hermeneutics as the fundamental foundation of reformation in Islam. According to these scholars, Quran is a primary source of interpretation of Islamic thoughts. This article tries to look at the tone of hermeneutics regarding women's politics.

Sacred Text and Gendered Politics

Gendered politics is a complex phenomenon in the Muslim world. Presently there are 49 Muslim's dominant countries with 1.6 followers around the world. There are multiple perspectives on gender inequality, but one of the significant perspectives is the wrong implantation of religious text and misinterpreting verses through cultural and gendered related lenses. As per pew Research Centre research the global distribution of religious beliefs are as:

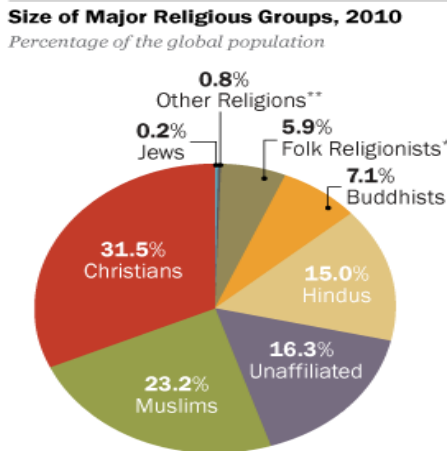


Figure 1

Source: Pew Research Centre.2012. *Global Religious landscape*

Historical forces, cultural context, and cultural beliefs all influence these social lenses, culminating in gender inequality (Shofan, 2006). Man and woman are two human species that are given the same or equal attention and have the same or equal potential. This role is not excluded from the Quran—a book which leads humanity to recognize and believe in certain realities. The Qur'an urges all believers, including men and women, to put their faith into action, and it promises them a great reward if they do so. Thus, in terms of gender division, the message of the Quran is the same for both men and women, and it does not discriminate amongst gender, the Qur'an makes no distinction between men and women (Amina Wadood, 1999)

The Quran provides the basic idea of Islamic legislation and women's role in politics. There are numerous verses in Quran that teaches the followers to understand and support the participation of women in politics. Quranic reference of *Saba*—a Queen, a ruler who consulted with all and made significant decisions on behalf of her masses is a major indication of women's political participation in the public sphere. (Mernissi, Fatima, 1993). The Prophet (SWS) was also a great supporter of women's role in the public sphere. The first wife of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), whose name was Khadija, was the Chief advisor of Prophet (SWS). The third wife of Prophet (SWS), Ayesha, was an intellectual authority in history, medicine and literatures, and rhetoric. She participated and accompanying the prophet (SWS) in battlefields. She also led an army in the Battle of Camel. (Lamia Rustum, 2003). The social advancement and leadership prospects are shown in the following diagram.

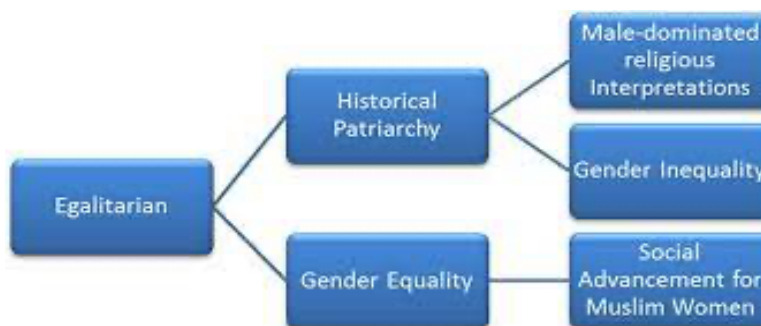


Figure 2

Leadership prospects for women in Muslim societies are expressed in religious books and teaching. Today and in past, there are different perspectives of women political participation. Due to power struggle and power manipulations, women are being eliminated from public spheres. In an interview with Raheela Qazi Ex-MNA, she

highlighted the issues related to the ideal Muslim women as mother, daughter and sister in modern time. She said that despite many global changes around the world the participation of women in political affairs can effect its social role. She highlighted the literature produced on women politics and their social role in society. ([Raheela Qazi, 2014](#)). Nikhat Orakzai (ex-MPA KP Assembly) in an interview highlighted women political participation. She focused on the relationship of Islam and women. She shared her intellectual insight by saying that Quran does not restrict women to participate in political affairs. She quoted the knowledge production related to Islam and women politics in her discussion. She also quoted women active participation in argumentation and discussion with Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in various important issues. ([Nikhat Orakzai, 2014](#)). In addition, during Hazrat Umar period, a female reasoned to him at a masjid and proved her argument and caused him to proclaim in the presence of crowd of people that a woman is right, and Umer is wrong. This was the level of women emancipation in the early phase of Islam.

In an online discussion on social media, a religious scholar Nikhat Hashmi from Al-Huda elaborated the issue of women political participations. She highlighted that this issue is more linked with religious phenomenology and hermeneutics. The social mindset is inspired by the interpretation of religious text in given context. Moreover, she also pointed out the issues with the translation of Arabic language in other native languages. The same text has a different interpretation in different parts of the world. She considers it a diversity of Islam, including Shia and Sunni Islam, with alteration in other regions and geographical spaces. Nikhat Hashmi explained that Quran has a variety of interpretations, explanations, and meanings. There is no single interpretation and meaning of the Holy Quran. Regarding women's role in politics, there is no injunction restricting women's role in politics. She said that role of women in politics had been increased due to explanation and interpretation of the Quran. The progressive and enlightened interpretation has a positive effect on women's freedom, power, and leadership. ([Nikhat Hashmi, 2015](#)). Quran also limits the authority of women, but it needs to re-evaluate the issues in translation and interpretations. While limiting women's power, the relevant injunction is as, "Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women)" (4:34). In the context of this translated sacred text, the general gendered behaviour as reflected in Pakistani society is more relevant. According to popular sayings in villages, a woman is a guest with her parental family. Her real house is her husband's house. Women can move two times in their life, one at the time of marriage from their parent's house and the other is moving to the grave after dying at husband house. This shows the impact of cultural aspects of religion and contextualized translation of sacred text in Muslim societies like Pakistan.

This ayat sometimes not interpreted correctly by different people. Verse 28 in Chapter 2 says that males are to some degree above females, this is again interpreted wrongly. In verses 29-44, Chapter 27, the Qur'an referred to female leadership with Queen by taking insights from Saba, known as Bilqis, who had a significant role similar to state's ruler. The relevant section which equates women role is:

وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا مِمَّا فُضِّلَ اللَّهُ بِهِ بَعْضُكُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ ۖ لِلرِّجَالِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا كَسَبُوا ۖ وَلِلنِّسَاءِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا كَسَبْنَ ۖ وَاسْأَلُوا اللَّهَ مِنْ فَضْلِهِ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمًا
(سورة النساء)

Translation. "And (do) not covet what (has) bestowed Allah [with it] some of you over others. For men (is) a share of what they earned, and for women (is) a share of what they earned. And ask Allah of His bounty. Indeed, Allah is of everything All-Knower". (4:32)

Allah also said:

إِنَّ الْمُسْلِمِينَ وَالْمُسْلِمَاتِ وَالْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ وَالْقَائِمِينَ وَالْقَائِمَاتِ وَالصَّادِقِينَ وَالصَّادِقَاتِ وَالصَّابِرِينَ وَالصَّابِرَاتِ وَالْخَاشِعِينَ وَالْخَاشِعَاتِ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقِينَ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقَاتِ وَالصَّائِمِينَ وَالصَّائِمَاتِ وَالْحَافِظِينَ فُرُوجَهُمْ وَالْحَافِظَاتِ وَالذَّاكِرِينَ اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا وَالذَّاكِرَاتِ أَعَدَّ اللَّهُ لَهُمْ مَغْفِرَةً وَأَجْرًا عَظِيمًا
(سورة الاحزاب)

"Verily for all men and women who have surrendered themselves unto God, and all believing men and believing women, and all truly devout men and truly devout women, and all men and women who are true to their word, and all men and women who are patient in adversity, and all men and women who humble themselves before God, and all men and women who give in charity, and all self-denying men and self-denying women, and all men and women who are mindful of their chastity, and all men and women who remember God unceasingly: for [all of] they has God readied forgiveness of sins and a mighty reward." (33:35)

In terms of the economic relationship of history or in the light of historical materialism, women's political role had been restricted in varying ways. It is historical and dominant forces that fix the place of the political role of women. Under multiple authoritarian narratives, women role in public space is critical and challenging. In a focus group discussion with the teachers of Islamic studies at COMSATS University Islamabad, the researcher placed the same argument of women's political role in public space. In this discussion, participants argued that many Muslims do not read Islam through different texts critically. They only listen to imams and religious leaders who interpret religion as per their own context. One respondent says that our imam is always talking about women and their restrictions in politics. Another respondent in the session argued that in Islamic history, women were given great wisdom like Rabia Bari and other great women in Arabia. She referred to wives of Prophet (SAW) as mothers to all believers having great respect and powers. During Prophet time there were many women who were on the top position of society. The first Muslim women Hazrat Khadija (RA) was successful business leader of that time. She even proposed Prophet (SAW) to marry her. She was also an advisor of Prophet (SAW) on important social and political issues. She played an important role in early Islamic period. Moreover, the other wife Hazrat Hafsa (RA) who was a daughter of Hazrat Omer (RA) kept Quran safe as a sacred text. The respondents also highlighted the role of Hazrat Ayesha as a military leader who led an Army in during a battle of Camel. The one of the significant points under discussion was Hazrat Umm-e Waraqa appointment as female imam by Prophet (SAW). In round table discussion, the respondents also focused that Prophet (SAW) always encouraged women to take part in political life of the society. Prophet (SAW) allowed women to take active part in socio-political sphere. Women turned under male domination after the death of Prophet (SAW). This was done for political purposes while interpreting Hadiths and Quran to control the society through male domination. However, the political role of women is very challenging across cultures and regions. It is also due to varying interpretation and the role of women in different parts of the world. In continuation of this argument, Dr. Zia-ul-Haq an Islamic scholar elaborated that the main source of women politics in Islam is Quran and Hadiths and Ijma and Qiyas. The whole body of Sharia sprinkled from these main sources depends on interpretation. Its nature of hermeneutics that define the nature of the text, and society socialize with such text as per their cultural norms, heritage, and traditions. Moreover, political systems, economic structures, and legal jurisprudence also have a deep influence over women's politics. (Dr. Zia-ul-Haq, 2014). The basic spirit of Islam is to reform society. Original, it was the reformist process in traditional Arab society. It has also pitedout that fundamental tome and complexion in Islam is basically its orientation of reform based on the principles of justice and equality. (F. Ralunan,, 1983). The ethos and voices of the Holy Quran felt as egalitarian and non-discriminatory. Dr. Zia-ul-Haq further explained that there are various ayats in the Holy Quran that validate and reinforce social hierarchy embed in gender and economic structure. The numbers of these verses is only six out of 6666 ayats that define the whole message of Quran. The major question is how these six verses dominate the remaining 6660 verses. The status of women and their political role is defined by rules, regulations and textual, literal explanation of Quran which are being used as a restrictive tool to women. Such restriction aree constantly challenged by many scholars. They believe that it's not the problem with women politics, problem lies in interpretation and textual explanation of religious text in Islam. It is an ethnocentric approach of considering fact which cause misinterpretation and women discrimination in public sphere. Historical events in gendered perspectives shows that it was men that performed their duties in translating and interpreting religious texts. Some other scholars like John L. Esposito have also noted that, societal, legal and political developments in the Islamic communities too supportive and contributed to a continuation of Muslim legal traditions uttering to uphold gender inequalities as the impressive idea of Quran. The literary and scholarly personalities have written multiple alternative perspectives and interpretations to the Quranic texts that indicate men domination over religious knowledge. The paper under discussion is an attempt to explore this mixed religious legal tradition based on multiple explanations of the Islamic text to formulate a theoretical framework for understanding and exploring women's political rights. Following is major framework to understand women subordination. This model explain the relationship of base structure and superstructure in which women as gender is positioning herself. This model explain a system which provide an insight to unfold gender relations and place of women in mode of production and superstructural formation in the form of religion.

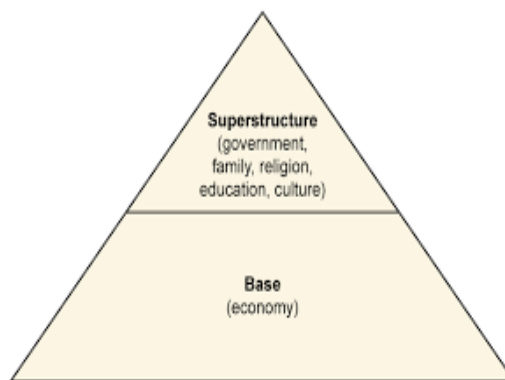


Figure 3

There are multiple ways of formulating theoretical framework beyond the textual sources to understand women politics. The gender un-evenness and women domination is a result of change in mode of production and hegemonic control over men of production in Marxian approach. Political rights of women in Islam need to be understood beyond the textual sources. Gender inequality embedded in legal structure of society can also be seen in feminist lenses (R. W. J. Austin, 1983). The women question in Islam is deeply entrenched in historical materialism and cultural context of pre-Islamic world. According to changing global context and rapid changes in means of communication, the level of interpretation has also changed. Following diagram demonstrate components feminist interpretation.

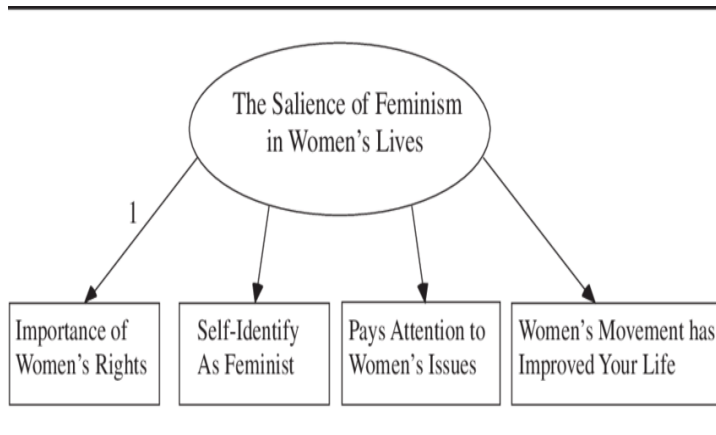


Figure 4

Source: Harnois, C. E. (2005). *Different paths to different feminisms? Bridging multiracial feminist theory and quantitative sociological gender research. Gender & Society, 19(6), 809-828.*

The feminist movements around the world are constantly creating a political space for women on the principle of equal space for all humanity without discriminating gender relations. Islamic orientation with feminism is not against the spirit of Islam but the new movements in human society need new meaning and interpretation of sacred text. The message of Quran is for all ages and times, this means there are many avenues of interpretation and space of construction of new meaning as per the requirement of given context and time. The message of Quran for women is favourable as compared to women status in the age of *Jahiliyya* (ignorance). The legal and communal status of women were improved by the expressed texts of Quran. Some ayats granted gender equality which means women have the right of equal social space in society as men have. There are other important announcements in the verses of Quran whose sole purpose is to defend women from male dominated sphere. This is all due to improving social status of women in society. It is recognized that principles of Quran, while strengthening the social base of women, do not align with social, economic, and political, equality, as "Men are a degree above women". The voice of sacred text in Quran has been elaborated in terms of gender hierarchy and projected as text which is not representing women in critical political domain but only commanded emotional kindness and fairness behavior. The nature of women disobedient is considered as the only negativizes in Holy Quran while describing women rights. Council of Islamic ideology Pakistan also proposed light beating to women in proposed women protection bill 2016. Commenting on this issue Islamic Scholar Maulana Shirani (2015) says in an interview that men can beat women lightly who are disobedient. But there is no similar injunction related to disobedient man. This situation arises a question why women need light punishment over disobedience? Why not men?

Keeping in view above discussion, the Quran 4:34 says that men can beat slightly to women who show disobedience. There is no comparable injunction regarding a disobedient man, hence the question arises as to why only women have been singled out for disobedience? B. Satwassar (1984) wrote that the Quranic verses made a foundation of explanation and interpretations and further recommendations to modify according to the contextual formation of society. Following diagram shows the relationship of pre Islamic and Islamic laws in relations to gender un-evenness.

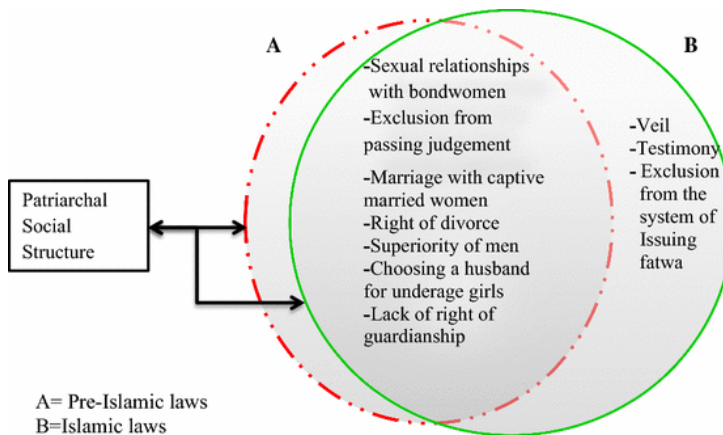


Figure 5

Source: Mehregan, A. (2016). *Islam-Arabic culture and women's law: An introduction to the sociology of women's law in Islam. International Journal for the Semiotics of Law-Revue internationale de Sémiotiquejuridique*, 29(2), 405-424.

There are multiple perspectives of looking at women's position in society. One, amongst many, is regarding the good role of women. But the question is who defines the idea of goodness and to whom? But here as per the textual translation of Quran the good women is a women who obeyed her husband and remain loyal to him (Thanvi, A. A. 1978). There are other side of women to whom Allah showered blessings. These are the more talented and extraordinary women. Allah blessed them with unusual experiences and extraordinary powers. These includes wives of Prophet(SAW). The term Amatol Muhmineen is used to honour their dignified place in believers. In respect to ordinary women, the religious teachings interpreted through Hadiths are different. Women need husband permissions in performing certain religious obligations like almsgiving, performing rituals, fasting etc. Regarding Almsgiving, the women in Swat have donated their ornament to local religious leader during Nafaz-i-shariat Mohamdi Movement in 1990s. In modern society health infrastructure is far better to improve maternal health care system but in religious interpretation if a mother dies during delivery case, she will go to paradise as she is shaheed. These narratives some time fuse a question over quality health care as according to religious sentiments all Muslims want to go in Paradise. So, dying in childbirth sometime projected as an opportunity towards paradise in hereafter. Women who die in Childbirth is a martyr (Shaheed). The other useful interpretation which is widely used by imam masjids in Pakistani society is construction a mosque. Every Friday sermon in Pakistani mosque ended on an appeal that if you want a palace in paradise then you need to contribute to build a mosque in this world. This appeal is more appealing to women due to their religious sentiments. Due to this religious move, the sacred text interpreted as that woman can build mosque and lead the prayers of women congregations. Mayor in his book *Islam and human Rights* further elaborated this issue Hadiths and religious text in Islam sometime contradictory to each other. The Islamic principle of parity equally considered as fundamental human right and applicable to gender equality. (A. E. Mayer, 1995). Equality amongst sexes is fundamental ethical value in Islam. In last sermon prophet (SAW) stressed the believers to keep equality and justice in a society. The Islamic values are clear that Allah created men and women from one fundamental substance. As Holy Quran says, "He created you from one being, then from that (being) He made its mate". Scholarship on Hadith also reflect instances where the code of complete equality has been espoused. The Prophet (SAW) said that all people are equal like the teeth of comb. "There is no superiority of Arab over non-Arab, black on white or white on black. Only the people (men and women) who are more pious are nearer to God". In the holy Quran, Adam (AS) and Eve (AS) are held jointly responsibility for the transgression and consequential expulsion from paradise. (B. Stowasser, 1984). Verse 7:18-26 of Al-Quran clearly explain the story of Adam (AS) and Eve (AS)

وَيَا آدَمُ اسْكُنْ أَنْتَ وَزَوْجُكَ الْجَنَّةَ فَكُلَا مِنْ حَيْثُ شِئْتُمَا وَلَا تَقْرَبَا هَذِهِ الشَّجَرَةَ فَتَكُونَا مِنَ الظَّالِمِينَ

Allah said, "O Adam! Live with your wife in Paradise and eat from wherever you please, but do not approach this tree, or else you will be wrongdoers."

The moral and spiritual obligations reflected here:

"For Muslim men and Muslim women, for believing men and believing women, for devout men and devout women, for true men and true women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give charity, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage in God's praise, for them has God prepared forgiveness and great reward". (Quran 33:35)

Dr. Farooq in a talk with Radio Pakistan highlighted it as, "Even though the holy Quranic verse 2:282 has been used to prescribe a rule that the value of the evidence that a female give in court of justice in financial dealings will be verified by another female, thus leading to the frequently held notion that the sign of two women is equal to a single male, yet there are different examples where the evidences of woman outweighs that of a male. Oath of woman in cases where her husband culpabilities her of unfaithfulness is enough to avert punishment" ([Dr. Muhammad Farooq, 2005](#)).

Verses 24:6-9 state as:

"As for those who accuse their wives but have no witnesses except themselves; let the testimony of one of them be four testimonies, (swearing) by Allah that he is of those who speak the truth; and yet a fifth, invoking the curse of Allah on him if he is of those who lie. And it shall avert the punishment from her if she bears witness before Allah four times that the thing he saith is indeed false. And a fifth (time) that the wrath of Allah be upon her if he speaketh the truth."

Islam has given women property and civil rights, including rights of share in inheritance. Women have been allowed/given complete control over what she enjoys and earn:

"And their Lord hath heard them (and He sayeth): Lo! I suffer not the work of any worker, male or female, to be lost. Ye proceed one from another" (The Quran, verse 3:285)

The Holy Quran also said:

"Unto the men belongeth a share of that which parents and kindred leave, and unto the women a share of that which parents and near kindred leave". (The Quran, verse 4:7)

Holy Quran further says:

"Unto men a fortune from that which they have earned, and unto women a fortune from that which they have earned". (The Quran, verse 4:32)

The above stated Holy Quranic verses thus create an order of impartial rights. Some other significant examples of non-discriminatory rules and laws granting Muslim women over all equality with male are mentioned in Quran. These laws give property and inheritance rights to women. Women have full control over their income, wealth, dowery etc. Moreover, women have the right to enter in marriage as per her own choice. Quran also accepting women political participation, right to hold public office, vote etc. Many Hadiths are quoted out of context which limit women participation in public life. ([Nikhat Hashmi, 2014](#)).

For instance, one Hadith is as:

"Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity." (Sahih Bukhari, Vol. 4)

Nikhat Hashmi further explained that this Hadith also interpreted out of context. This hadith came up about 25 years after the death of Prophet (SAW). This Hadith was used politically for countering Hazrat Aisha-the wife of Prophet in war of Camel. ([Nikhat Hashmi, 2014](#)).

Conclusion

As per above discussion, it is concluded that interpretation of Quran on the basis of hermeneutical science is a continues process followed by many scholars like Fazalur Rehman, Amina Wadud, JavedGhamdi etc. the concept of Hermeneutics is encompassing the whole social process of thinking. Moreover, hermeneutics also produces conflicts and controversies over the issue of women politics and creation of equal space for both men and women. As per the hermeneutical studies of Quran, the interpretivist approach considers equal political space for all gender in political sphere. From 20th century to onward, the textual interpretation has changed rapidly along with the changing dynamics of the society. To make the women relevant in political arena, scholar re-oriented the religious studies within the framework of social science. This can be called liberating religious studies from the domination of centuries old knowledge imperialism.

References

- Wadud, A. (1999). *Qur'an and woman: Rereading the sacred text from a woman's perspective*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- Schmidt, L. K. (2016). *Understanding hermeneutics*. Routledge.
- Roszak, P., & Vijgen, J. (Eds.) (2015). *Reading sacred scripture with Thomas Aquinas: hermeneutical tools, theological questions and new perspectives* (p. 115). Brepols.
- Mernissi, F. (1993). *The forgotten queens of Islam*. U of Minnesota Press.
- Thanvi, A. A. (1978). *BahishtiZewar (Heavenly Ornaments)*. Hanif.
- Shehadeh, L. R. (2003). The idea of women in fundamentalist Islam.
- Raheela Qazi, Ex-MNA, (2000). Interview with author, Islamabad, 11 March
- Nikhath O. Ex-MPA KP Assembly (2014). Interview with author, Islamabad: March 20
- Nikhath, H. (2015). Interview with author, Islamabad, March 15
- Haq, Z. u. (2014). Interview with author, Islamabad 25 March
- Nashat, G. (1982). *Women and Revolution in Iran*, Boulder CO: Westview Press
- Elwell-Sutton, L. P., Denis, M., & Ahmed, A. S. (1983). Islam in the Modern World.
- Stowasser, B. (1984). The Status of Women in Early Islam, in F. Hussain (ed.), *Muslim Women* St. Martin's Press
- Mayer, A. E. (1995). *Islam and Human Rights Tradition and Politics*, Boulder: Westview Press.
- Farooq, M. (2006). Talk with Radio Pakistan, Program *Khayee Allah Filah*, 15 August
- Timm, J. R. (Ed.). (1992). *Texts in context: Traditional hermeneutics in South Asia*.